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In a historic step, strippers at an LA bar unionize

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Emma Bowman

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Strippers react to their colleagues addressing the crowd at a rally in support of dancers from the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in North Hollywood, Calif., in August.

Frederic J. Brown/AFP/Getty Images

More than a year after taking to the picket line, dancers at a topless dive bar in Los Angeles unanimously voted to unionize, making them the only group of organized strippers in the U.S.

The vote count, 17-0, held on Zoom by the National Labor Relations Board on Thursday means the strippers will join the Actors' Equity Association, a union that represents more than 51,000 actors and stage managers.

After months of employer opposition to the union drive, lawyers representing the owners of the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar withdrew all election challenges and agreed to recognize the union, organizers announced on Tuesday.

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The news comes after a 15-month battle between the North Hollywood club and the group of dancers, who are seeking higher compensation and safer workplace conditions, including better security to protect them from belligerent patrons.

The Star Garden dancers can now enter collective bargaining with management.

"We're looking forward to having a productive relationship with the club that benefits dancers and also helps the club to thrive," said Actors' Equity President Kate Shindle in a statement on Tuesday.



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Meet the strippers working to unionize a Los Angeles dive bar

Reagan, a Star Garden dancer who said she'd been fired after voicing her safety concerns with management, said in a statement: "This has been a long, exhausting fight, which is why this victory is so sweet."

Dancers at the dive bar said they were locked out of their workplace starting in March 2022 after raising health and safety concerns with management in a

petition. The dancers who previously spoke to NPR described a lack of any COVID-19 precautions, patrons filming them without consent, and hazardous stage conditions.

For the following eight months, the strippers and their supporters picketed weekly in front of Star Garden on the North Hollywood bar's busiest nights. Each night was a party; the locked-out strippers wore themed costumes, put on runway shows and encouraged people to go to other strip clubs.

A union election held last year faced challenges that delayed the outcome



Strippers rally in support of unionizing strippers from the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar on Aug. 19, 2022, in North Hollywood.

Frederic J. Brown/AFP via Getty Images

The formal vote count ends a six-month limbo after the union election process began. The results of a November election were shelved due to employer legal challenges. Star Garden claimed that most of the individuals the union says are eligible to vote were never employees of Star Garden but were "lessees," who should not be allowed to vote. The employers also filed for bankruptcy, a move that can void union contracts.

As part of its settlement with the union, Star Garden has agreed to exit the bankruptcy, and the club will reopen within 30 to 60 days of the bankruptcy dismissal, said An Ruda, a lawyer representing Star Garden management.

"Star Garden is committed to negotiating in good faith with Actor's Equity a first of its kind collective bargaining agreement which is fair to all parties," Ruda said in a statement.

According to Shindle, the settlement also stipulates that no security guards who worked at Star Garden previously can work at Star Garden going forward.

"This is not just a win for the dancers at this club, but the entire strip club industry," said Lilith, a Star Garden dancer. "Strippers who want to unionize their workplaces and have a voice in the way their clubs are run now have a clear path forward."

The Star Garden campaign is part of a wider national push among employees to unionize their workplaces — with some early successes. Recently, though, union elections have seen mixed results. Since workers on Staten Island unionized the first Amazon warehouse, campaigns to unionize other Amazon warehouses have been unsuccessful. The high pace of organizing at Starbucks stores last spring has also slowed.

While other groups of strippers have organized efforts to form a union, the last group to successfully unionize was the workers at San Francisco's Lusty Lady in 1996, before the establishment closed in 2013, according to Actor's Equity.

NPR's Andrea Hsu contributed to this report.

labor unions

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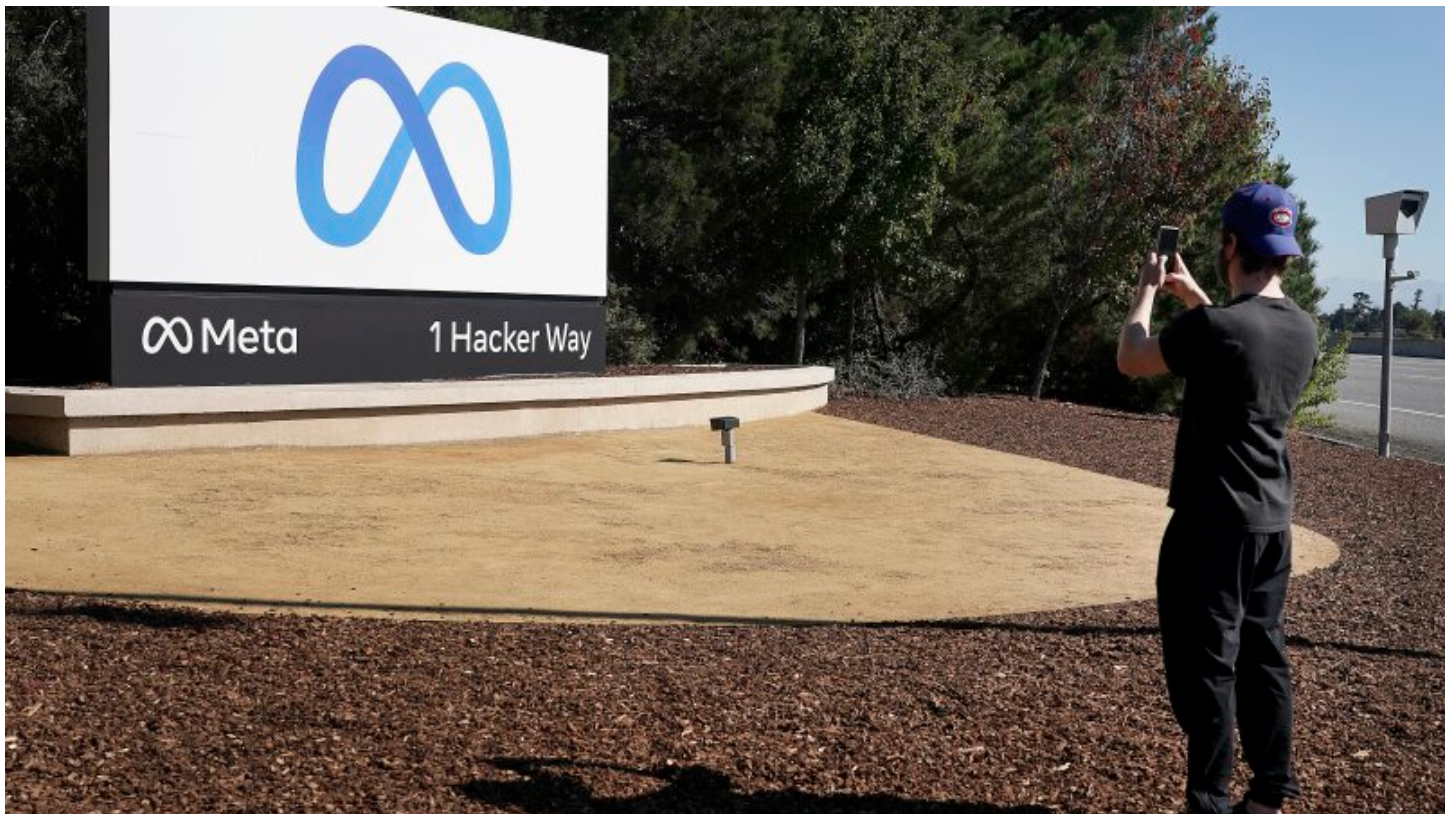
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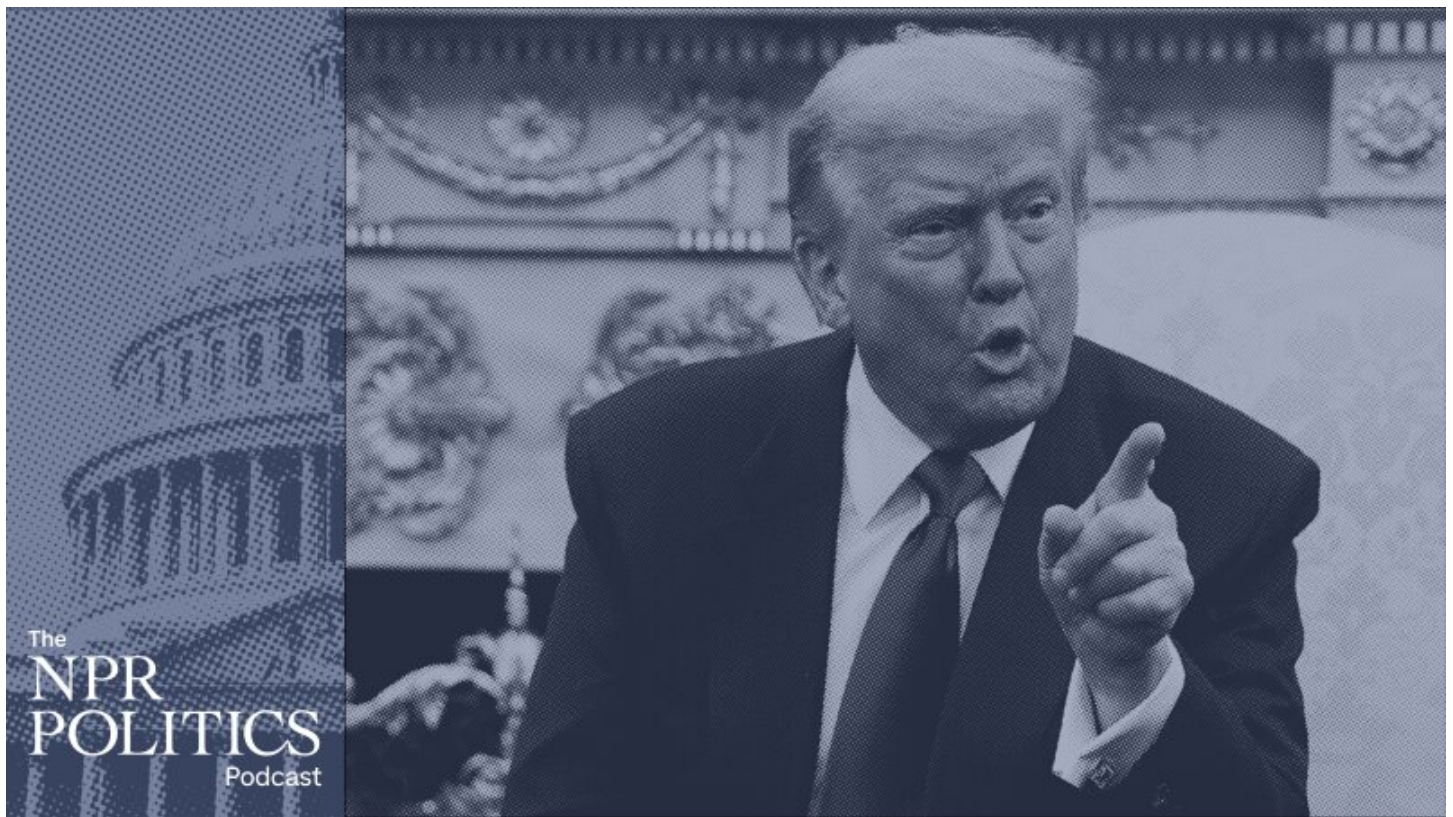
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